

**Submission
No 153**

**INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS
CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011**

Organisation: Unincorporated Hunter Area Friends

Date received: 16/02/2012

Submission to Enquiry; Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

This submission has been written on behalf of and as agreed to by all of the widely experienced retired friends named at the end of this document. Each friend has had the opportunity for input to, and amendment of, the initial draft.

Dear Inquiry Members,

We are all parents and are concerned to ensure that succeeding generations have the opportunity to benefit from a public education system in this country, and particularly in this State, that is as successful as can be achieved.

Some argue that, to be effective, moral codes must be based on Christian beliefs and that it follows that, unless children are taught what those beliefs are, and what moral guidelines necessarily flow from them, they will never know how to behave properly. This is demonstrably untrue. There is overwhelming evidence that modern homo-sapiens have existed for over 100,000 years and that, well before then, generations of various Homo species and their forbears lived in functioning groups with sufficient moral and ethical rules for their survival. The Egyptian, ancient Asian and South American races and empires survived for long periods before any surviving Abrahamic religion came into being. Even the so-called golden rule that many claim originated with Jesus was widely known and observed in ancient cultures as diverse as the Egyptian and Chinese well before Jesus was born.

Philosophical thought preceded the Roman Empire with Socrates, four centuries before Christ, advocating self examination of behaviour by each individual to ensure that a good (ethical) life was lived.

The Socratic intention has been revived and verified as a superior basis for an ethical and good life. The northern European nations Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway all rate rather low on religiosity measures but high on quality of life and social equity scales. Only recently, a comparison of the OECD countries verified that on eight measures these European countries, and Iceland, filled the top five places and well outranked both Australia (21st) and the USA (27th)¹. Finland is regarded by many as having the world's best education system yet Australia appears to be following the USA practices. The Conservative Party led government of the UK, contrary to all evidence, seems determined to reinforce the position of religion in education.

A well constructed trial of Socratic type thinking was undertaken at in Clackmannan-shire, Scotland, during 2001-2 under the supervision of the University of Dundee. Two separate groups of ten and eleven year old students, each group numbering over seventy students in separate schools, were tested and found to be closely matched in Cognitive Ability Test scores. One of the groups then participated for one hour per week for sixteen months in discussion in class of open ended philosophical questions. The two groups were then retested. Apart from the test scores which showed an improvement of 6.5 points for the discussion students, whereas there was no change for the control group students, there were other quite obvious benefits. The first of these was that classroom, and indeed general behaviour, of the discussion students had improved significantly with bullying virtually eliminated. The second such benefit was that the students and teachers subsequently had much more and much better discussions on all matters, in both directions.

The ethics classes in NSW public primary schools came into being because people became aware of Philosophy for Children and the Clackmannanshire Trial and non-religious parents wanted some suitable activity for their children during Special Religious Education time. The initial ethics classroom materials were prepared by Associate Professor Philip Cam, who had worked with Clackmannanshire educational authority staff. The materials were based on his and their experiences.

The ethics classes are popular with the students involved, their parents, and the supervising volunteers and to eliminate them would be a retrograde step for those students and the State. The benefits of the discussion method, as described above will be lost if there is any move away from that method to a dogmatic or curriculum method with defined aims and preferred outcomes. Such

methods stifle thinking. Dr Collette Livermoor, who has worked with the late Mother Teresa stated, "Suppression of thought drowns the intellect and leads to immaturity and stunting of the personality. An individual must be allowed the freedom to explore, to float and let their ideas find equilibrium; to fashion for themselves a set principles that helps them respond to the world with intelligence."

We believe that countries using dogmatic methods of education and religious dogma as a basis for morals and ethics will condemn their country and its citizens to second class outcomes.

Australia faces Asian countries, against which we compete, where the educational aim appears to be well qualified people able to think clearly. The improvement in cognitive abilities established for the test class students in the Clackmannanshire Trial, in reality a measure of the improvement in each participating student's ability to think, show just how Australia could benefit from the wide adoption of the ethics classes concept.

While studies have shown that some animals, such as porpoises, most primates and many other species have some ability to remember, and even think, human beings are well ahead of other species in their ability to think, to conceptualise and to analyse. These abilities allow humans to choose between various alternatives and this is the basis of free will.

In the ethics classes each student has the opportunity to evaluate their own opinion on each question, comparing their own views on an issue to the different views of their peers, in a situation where every effort is made to minimise peer pressure. How can that be anything but an advantage to any participating student?

In this state there still are schools and teachers aiming to undermine the accepted theories of science. Some appear not to understand the scientific method and consider a scientific theory on some phenomenon a poorer explanation than the writings of ancients. In science, a theory is the summation which fits all of the presently known evidence concerning a particular phenomenon. All of the marvellous inventions and understandings in medicine, biology, engineering, electronics, flight etc., from which our improved living standard and extended longevity have originated, are based on the theories of science. Students need to understand that.

The late renowned essayist, Christopher Hitchens, summed up our argument quite precisely when he wrote,

"The concept of revealed truth degrades the whole concept of free intelligence by purportedly relieving us of the hard task of working out ethical principles for ourselves".²

The ethics classes are very successfully helping some young Australians work out ethical principles for themselves and, at the same time, developing more fully their intellectual potential. That they are developing satisfactory and probably superior ethical platforms for use throughout their lives has been supported by the behaviour improvements found in the Clackmannanshire Trial and the durability of the improvements as shown in follow up testing.

It will be a travesty if the Inquiry finds otherwise.

References ;

¹ See attached chart- prepared for New York Times from information in a report on OECD countries

² From, 'Letters to a Young Contrarian', Christopher Hitchens, paperback edition, Ch.9, p.58

Submitted and approved by;

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Bottom of the Heap

Selected measures from the report "Social Justice in the OECD – How Do the Member States Compare?" Includes some categories of index ratings and some raw data.



Ratings are weighted and on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest).

Inter-generational justice rating Includes family and pension policies, environmental policies and assessment of political-economic being established for future generations.

	Overall social justice rating	Overall poverty prevention rating	Overall poverty rate	Child poverty rate	Senior citizen poverty rate	Income inequality (Gini Index) <i>Higher numbers represent more income inequality</i>	Pre-primary education <i>Public expenditure on pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP</i>	Health rating <i>Inclusiveness, quality of service, and perceived health between highest/lowest incomes</i>	
Iceland	8.73	9.07	6.4 %	6.7 %	6.7 %	0.301	0.75%	8.53	7.18
Norway	8.31	8.87	7.8	5.5	8.0	0.250	0.42	7.30	8.53
Denmark	8.20	9.16	6.1	3.7	12.3	0.248	0.60	7.53	8.10
Sweden	8.18	8.43	8.4	7.0	9.9	0.259	0.67	7.87	9.00
Finland	8.06	8.53	8.0	5.2	13.0	0.259	0.36	7.17	8.01
Netherlands	7.72	8.88	7.2	9.6	1.7	0.294	0.38	7.08	6.82
Switzerland	7.44	7.39	9.3	9.4	17.6	0.303	0.19	8.03	7.55
Luxembourg	7.27	8.35	8.5	11.0	2.7	0.288	0.45	7.89	7.01
Canada	7.26	7.00	12.0	14.8	4.9	0.324	0.20	7.63	6.06
France	7.25	8.66	7.2	9.3	5.3	0.293	0.63	7.67	7.17
Czech Republic	7.17	9.18	5.5	8.8	3.6	0.256	0.42	5.84	5.97
New Zealand	7.14	6.27	11.0	12.2	23.5	0.330	0.45	8.18	6.98
Austria	7.13	8.49	7.9	7.2	9.9	0.261	0.45	6.87	7.11
Germany	7.03	8.12	8.9	8.3	10.3	0.295	0.40	6.63	6.87
Britain	6.79	6.92	11.0	13.2	12.2	0.345	0.28	6.77	6.95
Belgium	6.73	7.56	9.4	10.0	13.5	0.259	0.59	7.05	6.10
Hungary	6.41	9.14	6.4	7.2	4.7	0.272	0.69	5.08	6.04
Ireland	6.41	7.51	9.1	11.0	13.4	0.293	0.003	7.00	6.06
Italy	6.29	6.78	11.4	15.3	8.9	0.337	0.49	7.45	5.12
Poland	6.17	7.15	11.2	13.5	7.7	0.305	0.57	5.04	5.33
Australia	6.14	4.24	14.6	14.0	39.2	0.336	0.04	7.68	6.29
Japan	6.00	5.21	15.7	14.2	21.7	0.329	0.09	7.66	4.95
Portugal	5.97	5.77	12.0	18.7	15.2	0.353	0.37	5.66	5.60
Slovakia	5.96	8.33	7.2	10.7	7.2	0.257	0.37	5.04	5.24
South Korea	5.89	4.26	15.0	10.3	45.1	0.315	0.09	7.18	5.72
Spain	5.83	5.20	14.0	17.2	20.6	0.317	0.63	7.35	5.77
United States	5.70	3.85	17.3	21.6	22.2	0.378	0.33	6.23	5.95
Greece	5.37	6.24	10.8	13.2	22.7	0.307	0.11	6.61	3.47
Chile	5.20	3.30	18.4	24.0	22.8	0.494	0.59	5.65	5.92
Mexico	4.75	2.11	21.0	25.8	29.0	0.476	0.59	3.51	5.34
Turkey	4.19	4.26	17.0	23.5	13.7	0.409	0.02	3.79	5.05

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/29/opinion/blow-americas-exploding-pipe-dream.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=tha212

http://www.sgi-network.org/pdf/SGI11_Social_Justice_OECD.pdf